

A Note on Allegorical Interpretation of Scripture

When we read the Bible, it is important to know how to interpret what we are reading in a way that honors and upholds what the Lord intended. First, we are to understand that “all Scripture is given by inspiration of God” (2 Tim. 3:16). The Bible includes several genres (types) of literature; for example, narrative, history, wisdom, poetry, parables, and epistles (letters). Scripture also uses allegory, figures of speech, similes, and metaphors, in addition to literal language. Thus it is essential that we use the correct interpretation for each genre and passage of Scripture. For example, the Lord is called our “fortress” several times in the Old Testament, but it would not be helpful to interpret this literally. The Lord is not a literal physical fortress, but the context of the surrounding text and the rest of Scripture help us interpret the meaning correctly. It is clearly a metaphor meaning that the Lord is our strength, protection, and safety, as seen in Psalm 18: “The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer; My God, my strength, in whom I will trust (Ps. 18:2).

Biblical hermeneutics is the study of the principles of interpretation that help us understand the Bible. There are various principles of interpretation, including the historical-grammatical interpretation and allegorical interpretation.

I strongly encourage the use of the ***historical-grammatical interpretation*** of Scripture; that is, seeking to understand the “literal” interpretation of a biblical passage in its plain meaning, by taking it at its face value. We do this by understanding the historical and cultural context; the people, things, and events described; the linguistic context; and by seeing how the author originally intended the passage to be understood.

At IHOPU we approach the Scripture in this way unless the text clearly indicates otherwise (see Jn. 15:1-6; 1 Cor. 9:9-10; 10:4; Gal. 4:24; Eph. 5:31-32; Heb. 11:19; Rev. 11:8; cf. Isa. 5:1-7; Ezek. 16; Dan. 7:2-8, 16; Hos. 2:1-14).

By faith, Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he...offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, “In Isaac your seed shall be called,” concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense. (Heb. 11:17-19)

The apostle Paul, on rare occasions, gave an allegorical interpretation of an Old Testament passage (1 Cor. 9:9-10; 10:4; Gal. 4:24; Eph. 5:31-32). Allegorical interpretation attributes a spiritual or symbolic meaning to a particular passage, as Paul does with Genesis 2:24 in Ephesians 5.

“For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church. (Eph. 5:31-32)

An allegory is a story with symbolic meaning, a literary form in which people or objects symbolically represent truths. The purpose and value of an allegory is to illustrate truths to make them easier to understand. In 1 Corinthians 9:9-10, Paul used an allegorical interpretation of the “muzzled ox” (Deut. 25:4) to apply to the full-time workers in the gospel receiving finances. An example of a popular allegory is C. S. Lewis’ series *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

Allegorical interpretations of Scripture can be helpful when used to illustrate truths that are clearly established throughout the New Testament. For example, Paul's use of the Hagar–Sarah story is described as "symbolic" by the NKJV, as "figurative" by the NIV, and as an allegory by the NASB.

²³But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, ²⁴which things are symbolic [*"figurative" in NIV; "allegorically speaking" in NASB*]. ***For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar—²⁵for this Hagar is Mount Sinai...and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is...²⁶but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all.***
(Gal. 4:23-26)

Galatians 4:23-26 seems to be "figurative" (typology) rather than an "allegory." However, in terms of interpreting the Scripture, the practical differences between a passage being interpreted in a symbolic, figurative, and typological way or as an allegory are minimal.

Paul's use of allegory differed greatly from Alexandrian allegory, which originated in the School of Alexandria in Egypt. Philo (20 BC–AD 50), Origen (AD 185–254), and Chrysostom (AD 347–407) were proponents of the Alexandrian school of interpretation, which often ignored the historical context and the plain sense meaning of a text.

Allegorical interpretation was rejected by scholars in the Protestant Reformation. They saw danger in the so-called fourfold sense of Scripture that had been commonly used by some of the Alexandrian scholars. The danger was in seeking to reveal hidden mysteries in the text, which went far beyond what the author intended.

I exercise great caution when using the allegorical interpretation of Scripture, because so many have wandered off with reckless interpretations. As a rule, I do not teach Scripture using allegorical interpretation. The primary exception I make to this rule is with the Song of Solomon, because of my commitment to see Jesus in every book of the Bible.

The Holy Spirit inspired the writing of all Scripture, and He came to glorify Jesus (Jn. 16:14; 2 Tim. 3:16). I cannot imagine the Holy Spirit inspiring a book in the Bible that does not ultimately magnify Jesus by inspiring people to love and obey Him more.

I am not alone in interpreting the Song of Solomon as an allegorical portrayal of the relationship between Christ and His Bride, the Church. The vast majority of commentaries through church history have interpreted the Song of Solomon this way; we note that Augustine, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Matthew Henry, Hudson Taylor, Charles Spurgeon and many others saw the allegory in the Song.

During the twentieth century, a shift occurred, as more and more commentators taught the Song of Solomon strictly as a love poem depicting the glory of married love between a man and a woman, without mentioning Christ. They present the book from the historical-grammatical hermeneutic. I strongly affirm the beauty and holiness of marital intimacy, and I believe that King Solomon had this in mind when he wrote this Song. Therefore, I value this interpretation of the Song. Nevertheless, as I believe that we should also see Jesus in every book of the Bible, so I also uphold the allegorical interpretation of this book.

We must refuse all sensual overtones in interpreting the Song of Solomon allegorically and in our understanding of the Bride of Christ message. Jesus is not our lover or boyfriend; such a concept is inappropriate and irreverent. We do not go on “dates” with Jesus. Receiving the “kiss of God’s Word” in Song 1:2 has absolutely nothing to do with physically kissing God. It speaks of the Word of God touching our heart by the Holy Spirit.

Paul describes believers as betrothed, or “engaged,” to Jesus in this age (2 Cor. 11:2). The consummation of the marriage between Christ and His Church is in the age to come when we see Him face to face. The essence of the message of the Bride of Christ and of the Song of Solomon is the revelation of Jesus’ beauty, His emotions for us, and His commitment to share His heart, throne, secrets, and beauty with us as our Bridegroom King, and of our response of wholehearted love and obedience to His will.

Jesus introduced the bridal perspective of the kingdom by referring to Himself as a bridegroom—“But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and they they will fast” (Mt. 9:15). In the parable of the wedding feast, He added to this concept of the Church as His Bride by comparing the kingdom to His Father arranging a marriage for Him (Mt. 22:2). The theme of the Bride of Christ occurs throughout the New Testament (Mt. 25:1-46; Jn. 3:29; Rom. 7:4; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:25-27; Rev. 19:7-9; 21:2). Finally, at the end of the age, Jesus will return in response to the Church crying out to Him in her bridal identity—“The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’” (Rev. 22:17).

My hope is that the allegorical perspective of Solomon’s great love song will encourage you in your pursuit of the first commandment to love and obey Jesus will all your heart (Mt. 22:37).